

History

The precolonial history of Southern Africa is a compelling, interwoven web of peoples on the move throughout this vast region – the original travellers on our planet. It's also a story of technology and its impact on our early ancestors. Although Southern Africa's history stretches far back into the mists of time, the only records today are intriguing fossil remains and an extraordinary human diary of Stone Age rock art.

The region has revealed many archaeological records of the world's earliest human inhabitants. It's generally agreed among scientists that the first 'hominids' (upright-walking humanlike creatures) became established in the savannas of East and Southern Africa nearly four million years ago, although hominid remains dating to between six and seven million years old have been found further north in Chad.

Sterkfontein in South Africa is regarded as one of the richest places on the planet for early human remains and is a World Heritage Site. In Malawi, archaeologists have found remains thought to date back as far as 2.5 million years.

It is surmised that about two million years ago several hominid species evolved, with *Homo erectus* developing basic tool-making abilities and eventually becoming dominant. Later evolving into *Homo sapiens* (modern humans), these early Africans are believed to have backpacked to other parts of the world, where local factors determined the racial characteristics of each group.

Today, remains of temporary camps and stone tools are found throughout Southern Africa, and one site in Namibia suggests that 750,000 years ago, these early people were hunting elephants and cutting up carcasses with large stone axes. By 150,000 years ago, people were using lighter spear heads, knives, saws and other tools. (Archaeologists classify this period of tool making as the Stone Age, subdivided into the Early, Middle and Late stages, although the term applies to the people's level of technological development, rather than to a specific period.) See Matobo in Zimbabwe, p724, and Morija in Lesotho, p137, for details of where to see early Stone Age artefacts.

EARLY KHOISAN INHABITANTS

Thousands of years ago, humans in Southern Africa developed an organised hunting and gathering society. Use of fire was universal, tools became more sophisticated (made from wood and animal products as well as stone), and make-up (natural pigments used for personal adornment) was in fashion. These Boskop people (named after the site in South Africa where their remains were discovered) are believed to be the ancestors of the San people, who still exist in isolated pockets today.

The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912 by Thomas Pakenham details the colonial history of Southern Africa and the continent in well-written and entertaining prose.

An Introduction to the History of Central Africa – Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe by AJ Wills provides a comprehensive work on the region and is considered one of the best around.

TIMELINE

c 3.5 million BC

In Southern Africa, evidence of early hominid fossils dating back millions of years has been discovered at the Sterkfontein Caves in Gauteng, northwest of Johannesburg in South Africa.

c 2 million BC

Homo erectus becomes the dominant hominid species, later evolving into what we now define as modern humans; sub-Saharan Africa really was the birthplace of humanity.

c 100,000 BC

Zambia's most celebrated early inhabitant, Broken Hill Man, lives and dies. Evidence unearthed by archaeologists in Malawi suggests that Early Stone Age settlements existed along the shore of Lake Malawi at this time.

Eventually, tools became smaller and better designed, which increased hunting efficiency and allowed time for further innovation, artistic pursuits and admiring the fiery African sunsets. This stage is called the Microlithic Revolution because it was characterised by the working of small stones. The remains of microliths are often found alongside clear evidence of food gathering, shellfish remains and the working of wood, bone and ostrich eggshell.

The artistic traditions of the San are evidenced by pottery and especially by the wonderful paintings that can be seen today in rock shelters and caves all over Southern Africa (see the boxed text, p34). The better examples capture the elegance and movement of African wildlife with astonishing clarity. More recent paintings even depict white farmers.

Despite these artistic and technical developments, the San had no knowledge of metal working, and thus remain classified as Stone Age people.

The San and another group called the Khoikhoi are thought to share a common ancestry: differences between the peoples were slight, based more on habitat and lifestyle than on significant physiological features. (The Khoikhoi kept cattle, which were a source of food and transport, and were even trained to charge the enemy in warfare.) They also shared a language group, characterised by distinctive 'click' sounds. Today these two peoples are regarded as one, termed Khoisan or Khoi-San, and are mostly found in remote parts of Namibia and Botswana.

In recent times the San have been controversially relocated from their ancestral lands to new government settlements such as New Xade in the central Kalahari in Botswana. For more information see the boxed text, p74.

To learn more about the San, including current issues for survival, see www.kalaharipeoples.org, created by a nonprofit organisation involved with the people of the Kalahari.

THE BANTU MIGRATION

While the Khoisan were developing, in West Africa another group with larger body types and darker skin was emerging: the Bantu.

Their advanced skills led to improved farming methods and the ability to make unwanted guests of themselves on their neighbours' lands. Over 2000 years ago the Bantu moved into the Congo basin and, over the next thousand years, spread across present-day Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania and migrated south into Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique and other parts of Southern Africa. The term 'migration' here refers to a sporadic spread over many hundreds of years. Typically, a group would move from valley to valley or from one water source to the next. This process inevitably had a knock-on effect, as weaker ethnic groups were constantly being 'moved on' by invaders from other areas.

At first, the Bantu in Southern Africa apparently lived in relative harmony with the original Khoisan inhabitants, trading goods, language and culture. However, as Bantu numbers increased, some Khoisan were conquered or absorbed by this more advanced group of peoples, while the remainder were pushed further and further into inhospitable lands.

c 30,000 BC

Evidence suggests that the peoples of Southern Africa had developed an organised hunting and gathering lifestyle, made possible by more sophisticated tools and weapons.

c 20,000 BC

The San had made significant technological progress by this time although it was restricted to stone. This meant increased time for leisure and artistic pursuits, which included rock art.

c 8000 BC

There is evidence that the San began producing pottery around this time, supporting the notion that their progress allowed them increased time away from hunting and gathering food.